

Last Epiphany
February 15, 2015
Rev. Lynn Hade

This week as I have been preparing to preach I have kind of fallen in love with Peter. He is so human, so like you and me, and he is so beloved of Jesus--his story has reminded me that what Jesus calls us to is not to perfection, but to more of a, well, a new reality where we can better understand God's love for us.

Peter was the first of the disciples to be called--back then he was called Simon. James and John were the next. They have been students of Jesus as he has tutored them in the ways of God, for the longest. It is Peter's struggle to understand what Jesus is teaching that is most often highlighted. In the gospel of Mark, he stands in as kind of an everyman's disciple, an example of what it looks like to struggle to understand the deep wisdom of Jesus, and to understand its implications.

For what Jesus teaches is not easy to understand, it takes time to sink in, and Peter, eager to learn and eager to love, is one who we see, pretty often, opening his mouth and putting his mouth right in it. And in response, we see Jesus hanging right in there with him, patient if sometimes terse, but loving Peter enough to bring him along in small steps. Kind of like he loves us, slow, stubborn, eager students of God that we can be.

So today we find Peter, with James and John on top of a mountain. They are having, literally, a mountaintop experience. Now mountaintop experiences are something that most of us can relate to, but they come in different ways to all of us. I have known people who have had them while trout fishing in the streams of central Pennsylvania, I have known people for whom the event of a child's birth, watching as what used to be an egg and a sperm, emerge from the womb, slippery and blue, and turn from blue to ruddy red in seconds, a new screaming little person, full of their own personality from the first cry.

Mountaintop experiences fill us with wonder, and mystery and a quiet joy all at the same time. From the peak of that experience we have a larger vision of life; we are filled with a larger awareness that we ourselves are a part of a great and wonderful mystery.

For Peter on the mountain, it was as if something clicked into place in a new way: Jesus his teacher was a mystery and somehow filled with the presence of God like Moses and Elijah. And right off Peter recognized that he was part of a great and wonderful mystery too. And right off he blew it.

Like so many of us, it was hard to sit still in the midst of such a wondrous insight, to just drink in the wonder of God. So Peter, ever impetuous Peter, wants to *do* something--and has the bright idea to build tents for the three--Moses, Jesus and Elijah. Fortunately, before Peter can get busy and hide behind his busy work, God speaks; maybe to keep Peter from missing the point.

Peter: don't run, don't you hide behind making those tents; this is my beloved son. What he is telling you about me, about life, about what he is up to, believe it. And don't be afraid, I've got his back. He's my beloved son.

Because you see, one of the things Jesus had most recently said, and Peter had most recently resisted, was that it was going to get worse before it got better. That the messiah was going to travel a different road than they'd all hoped.

Like most of us, I expect. Peter wanted his religion to be easy.

We have those mountaintop experiences and we see the larger vision and we think, ah yes, there is a God, a reality that is large and wonderful and mysterious. But then life intervenes and there is pain and suffering and we wonder, where is God when I need him?

It would be no different for Peter. In the coming weeks his understanding of messiah would continue to be challenged. It would be, in fact, as Jesus had told them one day before he took Peter up the mountain. There would be trouble for the messiah, taught Jesus. The religious authorities would challenge him, would kill him. The messiah would suffer and die before the full glory of God was revealed. For Peter, this was just too much to swallow and he even scolded Jesus for saying such a thing. He didn't want his relationship with God to include the hard parts of life.

When we are on the mountaintop, we know what is waiting for us at the bottom. And we know it won't be all pleasantness and light. Maybe it could have been, maybe we think it should have been. But life is life, and stuff happens. People betray us, our bodies betray us, violence happens, cancer happens, poverty and despair happen.

And though it will take him a long time to trust the truth Jesus teaches, Peter will eventually learn and accept that even Jesus didn't stay up on that mountain. That God isn't just there up on the mountain, but God walks with us when life gets sharp and hard and miserable. Eventually, we know, that Peter learns that the hard parts of life are places God can be too. Eventually Peter becomes the rock on which the church will be built.

So, I kind of like Peter, because he is so much like you and I. He struggles to understand what Jesus is teaching him about God. He balks at the idea of the strange and the new. He even has the hutzpah to scold Jesus! But he has tenacity too. His enthusiasm to learn of God keeps him hanging in there. Maybe that is why Jesus picked him first. It takes tenacity to hang in there when things are muddy and the future is unrolling in new and scary ways.

But most of all I like the story of Peter because it is the story of God's faithfulness, of the patience of Jesus for our human quirks. For every bit of Peter's stubbornness is matched and raised by God's faithfulness. Jesus really wants Peter to get it, to get the nature of God, and he doesn't give up on Peter just because he is a slow and stubborn learner.

I think God probably takes delight in our delight at mountaintop experiences. I imagine that God loves those moments when we catch a whiff of the holiness of life. I imagine that there might even be a holy 'yes!'

But during Lent, we are invited to remember that loving God, and God loving us, and us loving each other, also includes those times when life is hard. In the coming weeks we will have an opportunity to reflect deeply on our struggle to learn of God and of our slow, stubborn, human ways that get in God's way of giving life to the world. It is a gift the Church gives us each year, the opportunity to remember that God walks with us through hard times, even when we bring on those hard times ourselves. It is a time when we are invited to gather up our stubbornness and our doubt and our fear and our sadness, and say to God, yep, that's me alright. I am exactly like Peter.

And most of all, perhaps, it is a time for us to be quiet enough to hear the whisper of God, who says: yep, I know.

And I am with you through it all because I love you.